

Buddhism and Vedanta are the Same – A Detailed Comparison

Buddhism and Vedanta are two big schools which have dominated the spiritual world till date. Among many schools which have existed in the past, only these two have made a great influence all over the world and still continue to exist. But they seem to be contradictory to each other in many ways.

But based on my own experience and based on what I have read, these two schools only seem to differ because they use different conceptual languages. They also have different teaching methods. But the essence is the same.

When it comes to Vedanta, Prasthanathrayi, consisting of main Upanishads, Brahmasutras and Bhagwad gita is the authority. In Buddhism, Tripitaka, consisting of Vinaya Pitaka, Sutra Pitaka and Abidharama Pitaka, is the source of all conceptual details. When you go through the scriptures with an open mind and with the support of your own spiritual realization, you will see that both are essentially the same.

Both schools talk about the cessation of suffering. The process of the cessation of suffering is called Moksha in Vedanta and Nirvana in Buddhism. Now let us see how these two schools define the nature of this liberation and the ultimate truth:

Vedanta

“It is this Akshara (the Imperishable), O Gargi, so the knowers of Brahman say. It is neither gross nor subtle, neither short nor long, not red, not viscid, not shadowy, not dark, not the air, not the ether, not adhesive, tasteless, odourless, without the sense of sight, without the sense of hearing, without the vital principle, mouthless, without measure, neither interior nor exterior,. It eats nothing, nobody eats it.”

– Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 3-8-8.

Buddhism

“There is that dimension, monks, where there is neither earth, nor water, nor fire, nor wind; neither dimension of the infinitude of space, nor dimension of the infinitude of consciousness, nor dimension of nothingness, nor dimension of neither perception nor non-perception; neither this world, nor the next world, nor sun, nor moon. And there, I say, there is neither coming, nor going, nor staying; neither passing away nor arising: unestablished, unevolving, without support [mental object]. This, just this, is the end of stress.”

– Buddha (in Nibbāna Sutta: Unbinding (1))

Do they sound similar? Yes, Because they talk about the same thing.

Now consider the following quotes:

There is, monks, an unborn— unbecome — unmade — unfabricated. If there were not that unborn — unbecome — unmade — unfabricated, there would not be the case that escape from the born — become — made — fabricated would be discerned. But precisely because there is an unborn — unbecome — unmade — unfabricated, escape from the born — become — made — fabricated is discerned

– Buddha (in Nibbāna Sutta: Unbinding (3))

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Verily, that great unborn soul, undecaying, undying, immortal, fearless is Brahman

This Sunyata or the ultimate truth doesn't have any attributes. It is the conscious space in which everything takes place. It is the substratum of everything that is in the reality, like a movie screen that acts as a substratum to show the moving pictures on it.

This substratum itself is empty of anything that we can call as a 'thing', including abstract things. A 'thought' is a thing; a feeling is a thing; a sense perception is a thing; and an experience is a thing too. All these are witnessed as the existing things or stuff that occupy the space of consciousness itself. This underlying consciousness is called shakshin (witness), satchitananda (truth -consciousness -bliss), nurguna brahman, sunyata and so on.



Buddhism and Vedanta are the same!

Adyaropa Apavada – The Teaching method of Vedanta

So, when Buddhism calls it as sunyata, why does Vedanta defines the reality in positive terminology? Because, Vedantins use a different teaching method called 'Adhyaropa apavada'. The teaching method intentionally superimposes some attributes to the ultimate reality first to distinguish it from everything that it is not. So, even though no concept can define something that lacks any kind of thing that is conceived by a concept, these intentional attributes are made in order to help the mind to grasp it as a concept at the initial stage.

Then Vedantins negate everything that it is not. They reject the body as not it because body can be witnessed as a thing. They reject the mind as not it because mind can be witnessed as a thing too. You first understand that you are Brahman and then you negate everything that is not 'You' by closely monitoring the mental processes every moment, with the detached witness attitude.

Finally, even the intentional attributes are also rejected. This helps to drop the initial concepts that were formed to understand Brahman. Once you let go of all the concepts of reality and narrow down to the bare reality of yourself, people say that you have realized the truth.

Let us see some excerpts from Vedantic scriptures which support this:

“Who so knows the Self, thus described, as the fearless Absolute (brahman), himself becomes the Absolute, beyond fear. This is a brief statement of the meaning of the entire Upanishad. And in order to convey this meaning rightly, the fanciful alternatives of production, maintenance and withdrawal, and the false notion of action, its factors and results, are deliberately attributed to the Self as a first step. And then later the final metaphysical truth is inculcated by negating these characteristics through a comprehensive denial of all particular superimpositions on the Absolute, expressed in the phrase ‘neither this nor that’. Just as a man, wishing to explain numbers from one to a hundred thousand billion (points to figures that he has drawn and) says, ‘This figure is one, this figure is ten, this figure is a hundred, this figure is a thousand’, and all the time his only purpose is to explain numbers, and not to affirm that the figures are numbers; or just as one wishing to explain the sounds of speech as represented by the written letters of the alphabet resorts to a device in the form of a palm-leaf on which he makes incisions which he later fills with ink to form letters, and all the while, (even though he point to a letter and say “This is the sound “so and so”) his only purpose is to explain the nature of the sounds referred to by each letter, and not to affirm that the leaf, incisions and ink are sounds; in just the same way, the one real metaphysical principle, the Absolute, is taught by resort to many devices, such as attributing to it production (of the world) and other powers. And then after wards the nature of the Absolute is restated, through the concluding formula ‘neither this nor that’, so as to purify it of all particular notions accruing to it from the various devices used to explain its nature in the first place’.

– Brhadaranyaka Bhasya IV.iv.25 – by Shankara

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“Nor can the Absolute be properly referred to by any such terms as Being or non-being. For all words are used to convey a meaning, and when heard by their hearers convey the meaning the speaker had in mind. But communicable meaning is restricted without exception to universal, action, attribute and relation....

The Absolute, however, does not belong to any universal (genus), so it cannot be expressed by a noun such as ‘Being’ or ‘non-being’. Being without attributes, it cannot be described by any adjective denoting an attribute. And being actionless, it cannot be expressed by any verb denoting activity.

For the Upanishad speaks of it as ‘Without parts, without activity, at rest’ (Svet .VI.19) . Nor has it any relation with anything. For it is ‘One’, ‘without a second’, ‘not an object’ and ‘the Self. Hence it cannot be expressed by any word. And the upanishadic texts themselves confirm this when they say ‘That from which words fall back’ (Taitt .II.9) , and in other passages.”

– (Bhagwad Gita Bhasya XIII.12) – Shankara

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And because the Absolute has no particular characteristics, the Veda indicates its nature by denying of it the forms of all other things, as is shown, for instance, in the following passages: ‘And so, therefore, the teaching is “neither this nor that”’ (Brhad.II.iii.6) , ‘It is other than what is known, and above the unknown’ (Kena I.U), ‘That from which words fall back without obtaining access, together with the mind’ (Taitt .II.9)

And the Vedic texts also relate how when Badhva was questioned by Baskalin he gave his answer merely by not speaking. ‘Sir, teach me in words’, Ba\$kalin said. But the Teacher remained silent. Finally, at the second or third time of asking, Badhva replied, ‘I am telling you, but you do not understand. This Self is utter silence’

– (Bramasutra Bhasya III.ii.17) – Shankara

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(a) In order to disclose the nature of the self as Brahman in itself Srutis like the following negate all specific features superimposed on it by the unenlightened common mind :-

“It is this Akshara (the Imperishable), O Gargi, so the knowers of Brahman say. It is neither gross nor subtle, neither short nor long, not red, not viscid, not shadowy, not dark, not the air, not the ether, not adhesive, tasteless, odourless, without the sense of sight, without the sense of hearing, without the vital principle, mouthless, without measure, neither interior nor exterior,. It eats nothing, nobody eats it.” – Br.3-8-8.

(b) Lest, by this strict denial of all properties it may be taken to be absolute nothing (s’unya), it is taught by means of illusory attributes seemingly pertaining to it owing to Upadhis (apparently conditioning factors).

(c) At the close of the teaching the rescission of even the imputed attributes used as a device for purposes of teaching, lest it should be regarded as actually belonging to it.

“Hence that Brahman cannot be denoted by the epithet ‘jnanam’ (knowledge) either.

Nevertheless, it is indicated though not expressed, by the word ‘jnanam’ denoting the semblance of consciousness which is really a modification of the mind. It is not directly denoted by that term because Brahman is devoid of genus and other specific features which alone are the occasion for the application of words to a thing. So is it with regard to the term ‘Satyam’ (truth). For Brahman is by its very nature devoid of all specific features. The term Satyam really refers to the genus ‘being’ inhering in external objects, and when Brahman is described as ‘Sat yam’ (Real), it is only indicated by that term. But Brahman is not actually expressed by the term ‘Satyam’.

Tai. Bh. 2-1, p. 285 – Shankara

Atman and Anatman – The difference

Whatever you observe in our conscious field is not You.. Therefore they are not the Self (or Brahman).. That is what the word ‘Anatta’ (Anatman) means.. Atman is Self. Anatman is that which is not Self.

This Atman or Brahman or Self cannot be put into words. Any name that is given to it is actually misleading to some extent. That's why Buddha only talked about Anatta- that which is not the Atman.

Read this excerpt, it will make sense:

“Objection : “Is not even **Atman** denoted by the word ‘Atman’ ?

Reply: No. for there are Srutis like ‘From which words fall back’, ‘That in which one sees nothing else’.

Question: How then do texts like ‘Atman alone is below’ and ‘It is Atman’ reveal Atman ?

Reply: This is no fault. **For, the word (Atman), primarily used in the world of differences to denote individual soul as distinct from the body it possesses, is extended to indicate the entity which remains after the rejection of body and other not-selves as not deserving that appellation, and is used to reveal what is really inexpressible by words”.**

– Shankara – Ch. Bh. 7-1-3, p. 542.

Neti -Neti in Buddhism

Now, let us read Atmashatkam, a vedantic short poetry attributed to Shankara and Anattalakhana sutta, a Buddhist Sutta that discusses the Buddhist teachings on Anatta – no self. Once you read it carefully, you will realize that both say exactly the same.

AtmaShatkam

1) I am not mind, nor intellect, nor ego, nor the reflections of inner self (citta). I am not the five senses. I am beyond that. I am not the ether, nor the earth, nor the fire, nor the wind (the five elements). I am indeed, That eternal knowing and bliss, the auspicious (Śivam), love and pure consciousness.

2) Neither can I be termed as energy (prāṇa), nor five types of breath (vāyus), nor the seven material essences, nor the five sheaths (pañca-kośa). Neither am I the organ of Speech, nor the organs for Holding (Hand), Movement (Feet) or Excretion. I am indeed, That eternal knowing and bliss, the auspicious (Śivam), love and pure consciousness.

3) I have no hatred or dislike, nor affiliation or liking, nor greed, nor delusion, nor pride or haughtiness, nor feelings of envy or jealousy. I have no duty (dharma), nor any money, nor any desire (kāma), nor even liberation (mokṣa). I am indeed, That eternal knowing and bliss, the auspicious (Śivam), love and pure consciousness.

4) I have neither merit (virtue), nor demerit (vice). I do not commit sins or good deeds, nor have happiness or sorrow, pain or pleasure. I do not need mantras, holy places, scriptures (Vedas), rituals or sacrifices (yajñas). I am none of the triad of the observer or one who experiences, the process of observing or experiencing, or any object being observed or experienced. I am indeed, That eternal knowing and bliss, the auspicious (Śivam), love and pure consciousness.

5) I do not have fear of death, as I do not have death. I have no separation from my true self, no doubt about my existence, nor have I discrimination on the basis of birth. I have no father or mother, nor did I have a birth. I am not the relative, nor the friend, nor the guru, nor the disciple. I am indeed, That eternal knowing and bliss, the auspicious (Śivam), love and pure consciousness.

6) I am all pervasive. I am without any attributes, and without any form. I have neither attachment to the world, nor to liberation (mukti). I have no wishes for anything because I am everything, everywhere, every time, always in equilibrium. I am indeed, That eternal knowing and bliss, the auspicious (Śivam), love and pure consciousness.

Anatta-lakkhana Sutta

“So, bhikkhus any kind of form whatever, whether past, future or presently arisen, whether gross or subtle, whether in oneself or external, whether inferior or superior, whether far or near, must with right understanding how it is, be regarded thus: **‘This is not mine, this is not I, this is not myself.’**”

“Any kind of feeling whatever...

“Any kind of perception whatever...

“Any kind of determination whatever...

“Any kind of consciousness whatever, whether past, future or presently arisen, whether gross or subtle, whether in oneself or external, whether inferior or superior, whether far or near must, with right understanding how it is, be regarded thus: **‘This is not mine, this is not I, this is not my self.’**”

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It is obvious.. Both say the something. This is called Neti Neti method in Vedanta – rejecting whatever that is observed as not-self. Here, it is important to see the thoughts, emotions and feelings etc are different from you, as they arise and pass away. As you witness these thoughts, you see yourself as a witness instead of identifying with thoughts and mental processes.

Nididhyasana and Mindfulness are the same

I understood that Nididhyasana which is prescribed in Vedanta and Mindfulness that is prescribed in Buddhism are exactly the same, when I read Swami Satchidanandendra Saraswati's interpretation of Nididhyasana.

You can read the book 'Adyatma Yoga' of Swami Satchidanandendra Saraswati to know how he explains it. He was a Sanskrit scholar and vedantic monk. He dedicated his whole life in bringing out the kind of teaching method that was actually adopted by Shankara. He lived up to the age 94 and has written over 200 books. He has worked hard enough to bring out the true teachings of Shankara.

Conclusion

We can compare Buddhism and Vedanta to two languages that evolved from a parent prolanguage. They split into two when Buddha refused to accept the authority of Vedas.

As centuries passed and different things evolved in each school, they became like two mutually unintelligible languages which belong to the same parent.